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CANADA's SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT with EAST TIMOR

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Solidarity Movement for East Timor in Canada

In this brief presentation, I will describe to you the building of the solidarity movement in Canada over the years, some of the obstacles to activism around East Timor, and our current efforts and achievements. I will focus on Vancouver and the province of British Columbia, which is where we are from.

The East Timor Alert Network (ETAN) is a national organization with groups in eight cities - Montreal, Hamilton, Windsor-Essex, Guelph, Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary and Vancouver. Currently, we receive funding from the United Church and Canada's International Center for Human Rights and Democratic Development. The network was established nine years ago by Elaine Briere, a photojournalist in Vancouver who was in East Timor just 6 months before Indonesia invaded. All of you have probably seen her photos because they have been used in articles and exhibits all around the world. As Elaine was not an activist back in 1984, she was not sure where to begin, so she wrote to Noam Chomsky - the famous American intellectual, media critic and linguist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology - for help. Chomsky responded by giving Elaine international contacts and, later, a workshop on activism. The network was launched. Within a few months, Jose Ramos-Horta invited Elaine to testify at the UN Decolonization Hearings. At the time, she was the only known person working on East Timor in Canada.

With a handful of others, Elaine started to acquaint Canadians to the ongoing sufferings of the Timorese people. It was truly a grassroots effort in that all of the information and energy had to be generated from within the network. There was no media coverage at all, no news stories to react to or do actions around, and no organizations to coordinate work with. So, slowly and step by step, a foundation was built of concerned individuals, churches, and sectors of the university and activist communities. With limited resources ETAN began to reach out by producing educational materials and news articles; doing slideshows, talks and photo exhibits; lobbying Parliamentarians, and participating in the international fora. The alternative media provided a space for the publication of several articles on East Timor, while alternative radio offered broadcast time. British Columbia's publicly funded educational TV channel even provided a little bit of impetus for the cause by broadcasting a 1and 1/2 hour show on East Timor consisting of a documentary and commentary on its Cross Currents show - a weekly show featuring social and political issues not normally ever mentioned in mainstream media.

Although these alternative channels to the public only reached a limited audience, by the time the Dili massacre occured in 1991, a good number of people had been informed of Canada bankrolling Indonesia's atrocities in East Timor, so there was a strong reaction by Parliamentarians and by a small but vocal percentage of the public. For the first time, there was some in-depth coverage on mainstream news with Max Stahl's documentary 'In Cold Blood' shown on Canada's national news program, The Journal.

Despite the coverage of the massacre, public awareness and solidarity with East Timor has been slow to emerge. If you ask a Canadian at random about East Timor the vast majority will give you a perplexed look. The existence of East Timor much less the atrocities being committed there have barely registered in the public mind. As such, Canadians find it hard to accept that Canada is somehow involved in a genocide in some remote part of the world. Like many people in other countries, Canadians tend to believe quite uncritically the perception of our nation as the world's favourite peacekeeper and honest broker. The primary reason for this lack of public awareness stems mainly from the lack of consistent, factual coverage of the invasion and occupation of East Timor and the genocide of the East Timorese in the mainstream media. What little coverage there has been has tended to downplay its significance or has distorted the facts in favour of Indonesia's annexation. Canada's complicitous involvement with Indonesia over East Timor has been virtually non-existent in the news.

Overcoming this lack of coverage in the mainstream media has been and continues to be a major hurdle for ETAN activists in Canada. The lack of coverage has not been due to a deficit of information or even necessarily a lack of interest. But the public are unaware of the facts because of a systematic, institutionalized and justified complacency based on misinformation and denial of information. The Indonesian side of the story has been hugely successful in reaching the ears of Canadians. Just as a recent example, this spring for the first time ever, Canada voted in favour of a strong resolution against Indonesia in the UN Human Rights Commission, after the US sponsored it.

While this resolution was widely covered in the US mainstream press, this significant vote did not get publicized in a single Canadian daily.

Recently some space in the public mind has opened for the issue of East Timor. While sheer persistence has been important, perhaps more crucial to advancing our cause was the release last fall of the film on Noam Chomsky called "Manufacturing Consent' in which Chomsky does a critical comparative analysis of the media coverage of Cambodia and East Timor. What was revealed was the systematic under-reporting of the genocide in East Timor while the genocide in Cambodia was over-reported. The essential point being made was that the mainstream media were systematically biasing their coverage of an issue in order to manufacture and maintain the consent of the public for a particular foreign policy, even if it meant outright lying. But even more important to the East Timor cause was the 30 minute segment on the genocide in East Timor which included interviews with Elaine Briere in conjunction with her photos, as well as the footage of reporter ~~George~~ Greg Shackleton's last message to the world from "somewhere inside East Timor" the day before his execution by Indonesian soldiers.

This film has been shown around North America and has left a lasting and moving impression on all those who have seen it. In Canada it has been the most popular documentary film ever, with over 25,000 viewers so far. ETAN, particularly in Vancouver, has been able to effectively utilize the film by having benefit showings and showings in theatres and universities where we have had information tables set up allowing us to disseminate more detailed information on Canada's role in the killings. The info tables have also enabled us to make personal contacts with concerned persons, many of whom have joined our mailing list. In fact, most of the newest of our 15 core members have been drawn to ETAN through film screenings.

One publicity tactic that worked well for ETAN was when we printed up a full-page open letter in the Vancouver Sun, the city's largest daily, condeming Indonesia's shameful human rights record. For this, we sought the support of many individuals to make donations to pay for the page, which of course cost thousands of dollars.

ETAN's basis of support within the public has been steadily growing across Canada. This support includes many groups representing local unions, churches, community groups, universities, parliamentarians, human rights, and other activists groups. In Toronto and Vancouver, we've received real support from the sizeable (over 300,000 in Toronto) Portuguese communities through Portuguese language press, television, and radio. In addition to local unions, the Canadian Labour Congress, with over 2.5 million members nationwide, has given its support to the cause of East Timor. In the future we hope to make direct contact with the members in order to mobilize their personal support.

At Simon Fraser University in Vancouver we've been working in cooperation with students there in pressuring the administration to cease its involvement in the $27milllion Eastern Indonesian University Development Project. This project is the largest one in Canada, in which its administators allow Canadian foreign policy to hide behind the university's prestige, all the while acting as paid apologists. Although the university has just approved extending the project for another five years, we have mobilized much awareness and support and will continue our campaign against the project. A recent slide show by ETAN at Vancouver's Langara College created enough support that when concerned students threatened to demonstrate, a person associated with a project there suddenly fell ill and failed to appear for a scheduled meeting. More lobbying efforts are in the works for the many Canadian universities who are cashing in on the ready supply of dollars for so-called development projects. A potential area of action being explored is the amendment of the University Act which establishes the bounds of power and accountability for universities, as well as the dismantlement of the University of British Columbia's Indonesian Information Center, whose sole function is to distribute Indonesian government publications.

ETAN has also been active in the universities and colleges through both members and interested students who have taken up the task of doing research papers on various aspects surrounding the issue of East Timor. ETAN has increasingly been requested to provide sources of information for research. This has been of great benefit in helping to spread knowledge of East Timor to fellow students as well as professors.

Finally, some of our more significant recent activities and successes include the speaking tour of Constacio Pinto in April of this year and, currently, the performance tour of Timorese folksinger Agio Pereira from Sidney Australia. In Vancouver, Agio was interviewed by the Georgia Strait, a widely read free alternative entertainment newspaper where he was featured on the front page. Another large opening in wide-reaching media was the front page interview with Elaine Briere in the

Financial Post's Pacific Rim Magazine, a prestigious paper that sent the magazine out to 25,000 readers.

Since April we have been running a provincial urgent-action letter-writing network with packages going out almost once a month. 'The Indonesia Kit', a book aimed at high school students and co-written by Elaine Briere has proved to be in hot demand, so we will be trying to get the book into the curriculum of all secondary schools in Greater Vancouver. Elaine is also working on her own film about East Timor, which should be finished by March, 1994.

Finally, our efforts right now are primarily focused on an election campaign targetted at our newly-appointed interim Prime Minister Kim Campbell. We will be having a federal election in October and intend on maintaining pressure on the PM as well as other candidates, and are making a concerted effort to expand the ranks of the Parliamentarians for East Timor. We kicked off our campaign in June with a 50 hour hunger strike in sympathy with Xanana's in front of Kim Campbell's office. In all her nine years of doing solidarity work with East Timor, Elaine Briere believes that the hunger strike was the most effective ever, with coverage from about 13 media source. This action really raised the hackles of her staff as they tried desperately to dissuade us from carrying it out. It resulted in a one hour meeting with her special assistant in which he was informed on the issue of East Timor and the urgency of Xanana's situation. He promised that he would brief the Prime Minister but to keep the pressure on we performed a low-key demonstration the following weekend during her first public meeting as PM. The following weekend we attempted an action at the hotel in which she was holding a special conference with most of the provincial Premiers. Despite a few of us being driven off the hotel premises by her security goons for no specified reason, we managed to sneak someone into the press pool who was able to directly pose the question of East Timor. Caught off guard she evaded the question. But again we were vindicated as another ETAN member in the crowd was able to remind her once again to "Remember East Timor" while shaking hands. Although this hotel action did not receive much attention from the press, our prime minister personally was reminded about East Timor at least three times in the space of about an hour.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the importance of us meeting at an international platform and having the opportunity to share with you about Canada's whole-hearted complicity with the Indonesian regime. Because, more and more, our government is finding it harder to shrink away and hide behind its pleasant peace-keepers mask. It knows that this facade is fading, and that not only Canadian citizens but the international community as well is holding it accountable.